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July 24, 2013

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Position Paper 2014-01 Benefit Services Section Funding

1. **Objective:** To ensure that the Department of Veterans Services (DVS) has the financial resources necessary to effectively recruit, hire, train, and retain staff members in the Benefit Services Section.
2. **Background:**
 - Veterans with injuries or illnesses resulting from military service may file a claim for compensation from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).
 - DVS assists Virginia veterans with the VA claims development and submission process. Services are provided free of charge at 22 Field Offices.
 - Virginia receives a considerable return on investment for helping veterans, estimated at \$122 million in new disability compensation payments to Virginia veterans in Fiscal Year (FY) 2010, \$154 million in FY 2011, and \$154 million in FY 2012.
 - DVS Benefit Field Offices are staffed by trained claims agents who provide direct, one-on-one assistance to veterans in developing and filing VA claims.
 - DVS has had a 70 percent claims agent turnover during the past five years, with many leaving for higher paying jobs.
 - DVS lacks the financial resources to recruit and retain trained and experienced claims agents by being able to offer them competitive salaries.
3. **Discussion:**
 - The state Human Resources (HR) system provides state agencies with the tools necessary to recruit, hire, train, and retain employees. However, agencies must have the funding necessary to effectively use existing state HR tools. DVS lacks the funding to make effective use of all state HR tools.
 - Frequent turnover among Benefits Section employees directly impacts services to Virginia's veterans. Because it takes a considerable amount of time to train new employees and for them to become fully certified, the effect of turnover is substantial and is detrimental to good customer service.
 - DVS has created a staff development plan to compensate Benefit Section employees based on their knowledge, skills, abilities, experience, and level of responsibility. The plan incorporates "sub pay-bands" that provide pay increases based on documented achievement of training milestones, certifications, increased responsibility, etc.
 - Implementing the DVS staff development plan will require an additional \$500,000 per fiscal year.
4. **Recommendation:** that the Governor and General Assembly support the recruitment, hiring, training, and retention of Benefits Section staff by increasing the DVS Benefits Services section budget by \$500,000 per fiscal year.